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ABSTRACT

This report examines the issues associated with school-to-work programs being developed in the U.S. and provides recommendations designed to facilitate the process of developing a national school-to-work initiative. It stresses the nation's increasing need for better-educated workers but notes the low rate (less than 50 percent) of high school graduates who pursue a postsecondary education, and even lower rate (25 percent) of those attaining a 4-year degree, with Latinos experiencing the lowest educational levels in the country. School-to-work initiatives are viewed as a possible answer to the dilemma, but neither educators nor business people have been very effective at developing a model of one. Concerns about the school-to-work model revolve around the following areas: (1) too much emphasis being placed on the vocational aspect of the program; (2) too little flexibility for changes in occupational focus without harming academic progress; (3) the potential for displacement of current workers; (4) problems with access to the program, particularly for Latinos; (5) the existence of discriminatory hiring practices against school-to-work graduates; and (6) a lack of employment opportunities. Descriptions of five promising school-to-work models are provided. (Contains 12 references.) (GLR)

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School-to-Work: Opportunity or Barrier?

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"Three-fourths of America's young people enter the workforce without four-year college degrees. . . . (T)he wages, benefits, and working conditions of Americans without college degrees are eroding rapidly. In the 1980s, the gap in earnings between high school graduates and college graduates doubled; for those without high school degrees, the gap grew even wider. The reasons for this erosion are complex, but two factors stand out: the lack of a comprehensive and formal system to prepare young people for higher-skill, higher-wage jobs, and the great shift in demand in favor of skilled workers and against unskilled workers."
--Secretary of Labor Robert B. Reich

The U.S. Department of Labor predicts that by the year 2000, nearly one third of the nation's high school juniors and seniors could be enrolled in programs providing them with a link between worksite training and school-based learning. They envision school-to-work programs revolutionizing the labor force. School-to-work, they say, will increase the competitiveness of American industry by raising the skill level of new workers. It will also give direction and assistance to the millions of young people who now graduate from high school with few job skills and thus little chance for employment.

Yet the school-to-work idea is both hotly debated and little understood. Some think it is just a new name for the vocational education classes into which so many minority youth are currently tracked. Others worry that older workers will be displaced by a new generation of cheap labor. With less than one in ten of their young people graduating from college, few in the Latino community would argue against something being done to help non-college bound youth become productive citizens. What is the historical role of the federal government in this process? Will their newest plan, school-to-work transition programs, really be the solution they are suggesting?

Non-college youth

Since the days of segregated schooling, the American public school system has used a dual track system. One track is for those who are identified as "college bound." These students receive a high-quality college prep curriculum. The other track is for students who have been identified as "non-college bound." These students too often receive substandard instruction, counseling, and facilities, along with a curriculum that does not offer courses to stimulate their intellectual curiosity.

"The financing, organization, and management of our schools are major factors explaining why America does not provide a quality education for all . . . No subject is more important to providing quality education for minorities than the restructuring of schools" (Rodríguez and Crocker).

Today, less than half of college-aged students pursue a postsecondary education, and only 25% of those earn a four-year baccalaureate. These figures are even lower for disenfranchised communities such as Latinos. Less than one in ten Latinos graduates from college. Latinos have the highest dropout rate of any major ethnic group and the lowest rates of high school completion and graduation. In 1991, only half of Latinos over age 25 had four years of high school or more. In 1992, the dropout rate for Latinos was 29% for those between the ages of 16 and 24, while the rate for African Americans was 14% and for Whites, 8%.

High dropout rates and low educational attainment levels translate into low-skill, low-paying jobs in a society that puts a high value on education. Latinos, who have the lowest educational attainment levels, also have the lowest level jobs. For example, only 49% of Latino families have

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incomes over $25,000 per year, while over 60% of White families have incomes at this level. Many youth in the United States are impeded in becoming productive, contributing citizens by not having access to adequate educational resources. According to *Tackling the Youth Employment Problem*, a study conducted by the Children's Defense Fund:

> "Young people without higher education or the specific vocational and technical skills necessary to succeed in today's job market are finding it increasingly difficult to secure full-time employment at wages adequate to support a family . . . These young people are unprepared to compete in a changing labor market that offers fewer opportunities in the manufacturing sector and increasingly demands higher level skills."

In addition, the nation as a whole suffers because its workers cannot compete in a technologically advanced world market. Seventy-five percent of young people in this country enter the work force without a college degree. Obviously, not all occupations require a four-year degree, but as technology becomes increasingly advanced, employers look for individuals who possess technical skills and advanced communication and thinking skills. "The higher the level of education, the higher a person's occupation will be—and thus the higher the earnings" (Rodriguez and Crocker).

For many years, however, business/industry and educators have seen each other as adversaries. Employers charge that schools do not provide students with the adequate skills (e.g., oral communication, listening skills, interpersonal skills, leadership, problem solving, etc.) to enter the workforce. Educators claim that employers do not value the academic skills taught yet do not specify which skills are needed. Schools are also not equipped to take on alone the task of teaching students vocational skills. The ramifications of this dilemma have been felt across the country. Today, less than one third of American employers believe recent high school graduates are adequately prepared for the current workplace.

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The policy response

In response to this economic and political dilemma, policy makers have looked to traditional apprenticeship models for decisions on the transition from school to work. In the nineteenth century, boys between the ages of twelve and eighteen were accepted as apprentices and lived in their master's house for three to four years. During this time, the apprentice "becomes proficient in a trade, craft, art, or profession under the tutelage of a master practitioner" (Mercer).

Policy makers have also looked to the successful school-to-work transition models in countries such as Germany and Japan. Although the school-to-work model has worked well in these countries, "some critics worry that American employers and schools cannot duplicate practices from other nations because of differences in cultures and circumstances" (Rosenbaum). For example, during the early 1900's--a time of great change resulting from industrialization and massive immigration--educators, employers, and labor experts came together to create a national system to ease the transition from school to work. Looking to Germany for guidance, these experts created a high school vocational education system. Because vocational education has resulted in a second-class program that attracted the least academically prepared students into low-level jobs, many view this federal effort as a failure.

Attempts to create a viable school-to-work program have also been hindered by the lack of an agreed-upon definition. When the assumed experts, educators and employers, cannot agree on a fundamental understanding of the school-to-work idea, policy making becomes harder because commonalities, in terms of strategies and objectives, are missing.

Many concepts are included under the framework of "school-to-work." Does it apply only to in-school youth, or does it also involve out of school youth? The term itself does not imply any connection to postsecondary education, yet according to the U.S. Departments of Education and Labor, the link between secondary and postsecondary education is a basic component of a school-to-work program. The many terms associated with it (e.g., youth

apprenticeship, career academies, tech prep education, etc.) also add to the confusion.

Until now, neither educators nor business people have been overwhelmingly effective in creating a school-to-work model in the United States that gives youth high academic and vocational skills. Traditionally, the emphasis has been on either one or the other. The Clinton Administration has attempted to tackle this problem by developing a federal initiative that unites the forces of the Departments of Education and Labor to address an issue linking both their objectives and build on existing successful programs.

Concerns about school-to-work initiatives

School-to-work programs are being expanded around the country. To assure that these new programs actually help Latino and other minority youth, parents, educators, businesses, and policy makers must be aware of the continued concerns with the school-to-work model. These concerns include the following:

Exacerbation of Tracking.
In theory, the school-to-work initiative will make education more meaningful to the non-college bound while providing them with a more challenging curriculum that enables them to pursue some kind of postsecondary education. However, discussions with officials at the Departments of Education and Labor indicate a tendency to place more of an emphasis on the vocational aspect of the program. Many Latino advocates find this message disturbing. Latinos and other minorities are already disproportionately identified as "non-college bound" in high school because they have been tracked by elementary and middle-school practices, low expectations and lack of opportunity. Without strong counseling and training of educators to change early treatment of Latino students, a school-to-work program could have the opposite effect of what is intended. Instead of encouraging youth who had no intention of attending college to stay in school and receive adequate training, the program may facilitate the tracking into vocational careers of those Latinos who could have been college bound.

Limiting Future Options.
The school-to-work model asks students to select a career major by the beginning of the 11th grade. Is it realistic to expect sixteen and seventeen year olds to know what career path they hope to take? Many students graduate even from college without a definitive sense of what they would like to do for the rest of their lives. Thus, school-to-work programs must guarantee flexibility for students to change their occupational focus without falling behind in academic and vocational course work.

COMPONENTS OF THE CLINTON ADMINISTRATION'S SCHOOL-TO-WORK INITIATIVE

Basic components of the school-to-work transition initiative jointly sponsored by the Departments of Education and Labor include:

1) Start-up funds to help schools and communities develop school-to-work programs based on existing successful models. In this way, they hope to strengthen and enrich promising programs that already exist.
2) The integration of school-based and work-based learning, of vocational and academic learning, and the linking of secondary and postsecondary education.
3) The expectation that high standards will be maintained for all students.
4) The expectation that students will choose a career major by the beginning of the 11th grade.
5) The earning of a high school diploma and a skills certificate upon successful completion of a program, leading to a first job on a career track, college admission or further training.

Promising Models Defined

YOUTH APPRENTICESHIP. A youth apprenticeship program combines on-the-job learning with classroom instruction. Usually lasting for at least two years, it beginns in the 11th or 12th grade and includes one year of secondary and one year of postsecondary education. During the program a student receives paid work experience and guided learning opportunities provided by employers within an industry/occupational cluster, a common occupational theme upon which the student can expand. Upon completion of the program, students will have earned a high school diploma, a postsecondary credential, and certification of occupational skills. Ideally, employers and schools work closely together to provide students with the necessary skills to either enter the workforce or to pursue a postsecondary education.

Working Example: The Wisconsin Youth Apprenticeship Initiative. During the 10th grade, students complete a Gateway Assessment—a measurement that allows students to prove mastery of basic skills across a variety of subjects. Afterwards, they may select from several pathways, including college preparation, tech prep and youth apprenticeship for the last two years of their secondary schooling. The youth apprenticeship program focuses on printing and graphics skills. A mentor training program has been established to help employers build the capacity for work-based youth education (U.S. Departments of Education and Labor).

TECH PREP EDUCATION. Commonly called a "2+2," tech prep programs usually occur during the last two years of high school and continue through two years of occupationally-specific postsecondary education, leading to a two-year associate degree or certificate. According to the Division of Vocational-Technical Education at the U.S. Department of Education, "Tech prep prepares the student for a highly skilled career that allows for either entry into the work place as a qualified technician or continuation with further education leading to baccalaureate and advanced degrees." A tech prep program requires a formal agreement between the secondary and postsecondary institutions involved. Tech prep programs typically consist of a strong career counseling component beginning well before the 11th grade. Applied academics in basic subject areas, increasing technical concentration, and strong business involvement are also characteristic of tech prep education.

Working Example: Project ProTech. Project ProTech is a partnership among the Boston Private Industry Council, Boston Public Schools, and employers in the health care and financial services industries. ProTech is a four-year program that integrates school and work-based classroom instruction, work rotation, mentorships, and internships. The program begins in the 11th grade and continues with two years of postsecondary education. Project ProTech participants receive both work-based instruction and paid work experience. Employers provide worksite mentors who counsel students about academic and professional opportunities (Education and Labor).

CAREER ACADEMIES. Career academies use the "school within a school" approach of a small community of students and a self-contained group of five to ten counselors and teachers, one of whom acts as the program's "lead teacher." Career academies generally recruit educationally disadvantaged youth. Unlike traditional vocational education, an academy focuses on broadly defined career themes, such as computers, electronics, or health. The academy model integrates academic and vocational learning through coordination among teachers who work together. Rigorous academic courses are inserted into the context of broad occupational training, giving students the preparation to pursue a postsecondary education. Career academies provide students with a work experience component by exposing them to job interviews and issues of work ethics and behavior. Local employers become actively involved in career academies by providing funding, job placements, and time. Unlike participants in the youth apprenticeship and tech prep education models, students in career academies do not earn formal occupational skills credentials. They do, however, have the opportunity to work in their chosen industry the summer after their junior year. An extended internship is also offered to second semester seniors. In comparison to youth apprenticeship and tech prep, career academies generally provide little coordination between work experience and classroom instruction.

Working Example: Oakland Health and Bioscience Academy. This three-year program fosters students' interest in the health and bioscience fields while preparing them for postsecondary education and for technical jobs in a hospital or lab. Summer internships during the junior and senior years and assistance with applications for jobs and colleges are instrumental components of this program (Education and Labor).

COOPERATIVE EDUCATION. Co-op education consists of "naturally occurring, paid jobs that are supervised by a school or other training agency" (Rosenbaum). Jobs most commonly held by secondary-level co-op students include retail sales, secretarial work, auto repair, and construction. The teacher-coordinator collaborates with the student's supervisor at the work site to develop a training plan for the student and a plan for evaluating the student's performance. The instructor frequently visits the work site to monitor the arrangement. Students receive school credit for their work site experience.

Working Example: High School Co-op Program, Roanoke County, VA. The Roanoke County School District has four comprehensive high schools and a vocational center. Most of the students are involved in marketing education and business and office education. Employers seeking part-time employees frequently call the schools to let them know positions are available. The program is run by fifteen coordinators who teach related classes. These coordinators have time during the day to visit co-op students at their work site and speak with their supervisors. All co-op students are assessed at the end of the semester by both their job supervisor and their teacher (U.S. Department of Education).

BUSINESS-EDUCATION COMPACTS. At the core of the compact model is a formal agreement between the public schools, the business community, trade unions, and local colleges. Its focus is to use employment and higher education as incentives to motivate youth to stay in school. The compact strategy encompasses three principles: First, it uses the promise of employment as an incentive for youth to stay in school and do well. Second, it stresses the fact that eligibility for jobs and for financial aid is tied to staying in school and getting good recommendations from teachers. Third, compacts use the mobilization of private sector resources to get the school system to pay more attention to the needs of non-college bound youth (Kazis). Schools and employers work together to help students see the relevance of staying in school and learning.

Working Example: New York School and Business Alliance (SABA). Several partnerships between public schools and the private sector have been developed to increase attendance rates, raise academic achievement, reduce the dropout rate, and provide opportunities for employment and postsecondary education. For example, the Elmira SABA provides internships for high school students in an engineering firm. In Binghamton, a chemical company brings students into the factory to learn about the array of careers in a chemistry-related field (Gold).

Displacement of Workers.

Those who are critical of school-to-work plans worry about the displacement of workers. They argue that jobs are scarce and that participants in a school-to-work program only replace the older workers who command a higher salary. According to these opponents, an expanded program will not improve the economy by providing this country with a highly-skilled workforce. Rather, it will create unemployment for an already established workforce in the United States. Advocates for the program argue that current workers and their jobs will be protected by unions or contracts from this kind of displacement.

Selection of Youth.

In a similar vein, youth advocates are concerned about the impact of school-to-work programs on those youth who do not participate. A national school-to-work program will not encompass all youth who do not intend to pursue a postsecondary education. It will also not create new jobs. Lacking expanded labor opportunities, therefore, part of the workforce will gain new skills while those without access to such a program will be more certainly relegated to the bottom rung of the economic ladder.

Exclusion of Youth.

Many who advocate for Latino, African American, and other minority youth believe that current school-to-work transition programs too frequently exclude their constituents from participation, particularly those youth who have left school. A high dropout rate plagues the Latino community in this country, yet many school-to-work models presently focus only on in-school youth. Others are not located in the schools Latinos attend. Many existing programs are located in suburban areas where minority students are less likely to have access to them. There are few or no existing bilingual school-to-work models, which calls into question the system's ability to reach limited-English proficient youth.

Discriminatory Hiring Practices.

Some minority youth advocates wonder about safeguards to prevent participating businesses from conducting de facto discrimination in their decisions to take on youth apprentices in a school-to-work program. Discriminatory hiring continues even in the face of laws prohibiting it. Given that businesses must be encouraged to participate with schools in the program, how will communities ensure that businesses share the federal government's commitment to serve all students, including women, limited English proficient individuals, the disabled, and ethnic minorities?

Dependence on the Job Market.

School-to-work programs can only succeed in easing the transition to the labor market if there is an adequate supply of employment opportunities. On the one hand periods of job shortages could mean the number of prospective participants exceeds the number of job vacancies. On the other hand, when jobs are plentiful there is little incentive for businesses to get involved in a school-to-work program. Some argue that businesses see the long-term benefits they can reap from highly skilled workers and so have all the incentive they need to become and remain involved. Others feel that businesses will act as "do-gooders" by participating in a school-to-work program to help revive the economy, whether through their own initiative or through pressure from outsiders. Yet some critics of this initiative believe that the program will have to provide incentives to businesses to keep them involved. Communities will have to work together to ensure that any incentives are fair to all involved.

Recommendations

If a national school-to-work transition initiative is in fact the answer to this country's diminishing skilled workforce, then communities will need to address the concerns raised in the above text. To facilitate this process, many youth employment, youth advocacy, and educational organizations have offered suggestions about what elements would make for an effective school-to-work program. The following is a summary of recommendations compiled from groups including the National Youth Employment Coalition, Jobs for the Future, the ASPIRA Association and the Hispanic Education Coalition, the U.S. Department of Education, and the William T. Grant Foundation:

1. Programs must provide an opportunity for youth to advance both occupationally and academically. They must bridge high school and post-secondary education. Every school-to-work system should encourage all participants to attain high academic standards. Students must be given the opportunity to take rigorous course work that prepares them for meaningful occupations or a postsecondary education. The school-to-work transition program must avoid the label of a second class program. A formal connection between high academic and skills standards and school-to-work may provide the program with the legitimacy it seeks.

2. Programs should establish a solid link between schools and employers. Teachers who will be involved in the program should be required to make periodic worksite visits. Thus, with the assistance of the worksite mentor, teachers can have a better understanding of how to apply the academic component of the program to actual practice. Employers should articulate to the schools the specific skills and goals they seek in a school-to-work participant.

3. The worksite component of all programs should be based on high-level skills. It should also include instruction and experience that allow students to understand all aspects of the industry they are preparing to enter. The Perkins Vocational Education Act defines all aspects of an industry as including planning, management, finances, technical and production skills, underlying principles of technology, labor and community issues, and health, safety, and environmental issues. While the youth apprentice may be undertaking largely entry-level work, the opportunity to learn about all aspects of an industry allows them the flexibility to consider additional options on their career ladder.

4. All school-to-work transition programs should create control mechanisms (e.g., informal contracts government controls, or a certification system) to assure that employers, students, and schools keep their commitments. Through contracts, schools and businesses can be confident that their counterparts will deliver what has been promised. Furthermore, a national certification system will assure participants that their skills certificate will be recognized nationwide.

5. A school-to-work transition system should be developed that serves youth who are (a) out of school and low skilled, (b) in school and low skilled, and (c) in school and at the skill levels they should be at for their age. Varied programs should respond to each group's particular needs. A program that works in a suburban school may not necessarily be effective in an inner city school. State and community programs should encourage a variety of models, all of which include a strong focus on ongoing counseling and mentoring to assure participants' achievement to the best of their potential.

6. Communities should tap into the education, training, and counseling experience of community-based organizations (CBOs). Because CBOs can offer one-on-one mentoring, their chances for reaching youth are high. CBOs also have the advantage of specialization: they often target certain issues or certain populations. As a result, CBOs are better equipped to serve the unique needs of particular populations, such as minority students or at-risk youth.

7. Data collection, in terms of which students are placed in which programs as well as ongoing evaluation of student and program success, should be a crucial element of any program. Communities must make sure that this information is reported. Thus they can determine if existing civil rights requirements regarding non-segregation, equal educational opportunity, and non-discrimination in hiring practices are being followed.

As we move into the next century, we must continue to work on an agenda that will help our youth move forward. A national school-to-work transition system can be a part of this forward movement, as long as local, state, and federal decision makers emphasize the need to bring out the potential of **all** our youth.

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